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CUISINE AS A MARKER OF CULTURAL IDENTITY. A HERMENEUTIC LOOK AT "INDIAN CUISINE", A SHORT STORY BY TRINIDADIAN-CANADIAN WRITER RAMABAI ESPINET

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Abstract

When it comes to cultural identity, cuisine is generally overlooked or relegated. Emphasis is rather made on history, religion or language (the so-called deep structure of a culture). Notwithstanding, one´s vernacular cuisine outlives one´s vernacular language in generations of immigrants. No matter how much it changes as compared to the original food of their homeland, immigrants and their descendants "keep cooking and eating some version of the family´s 'mother cuisine' ". Immigrants' cultural identity is embodied in what has been called "ethnic food", which is in turn caused by several factors. The author of this paper examines cuisine as a marker of cultural identity and, for that purpose, he gives a hermeneutic look at the short story "Indian Cuisine", by adhering to Daniel Chandler´s typology of codes.

Keywords: Cultural identity, cuisine, deep structure, ethnic food

Introduction

Senegalese anthropologist Cheik Anta Diop views history, language and psychology as the three pillars of a people or a person´s identity. For Elicura Chihuailaf, language, the territory, history and one´s way of being are the four fundamental pillars of identity. And when talking about the deep structure of a culture, Samovar and Porter (Communication Between Cultures, p. 82-135) go deep into aspects such as history, religion and family. It has been customary for scholars to leave cuisine aside when it comes to a people´s cultural identity. Notwithstanding, cuisine is perhaps one of the most-resistant-to-change issues of cultural identity.

The definition given by Joseph Shaules seems to embrace, however, the concept of cuisine at least implicitly:

"Deep structure refers to the unconscious meanings, values, norms and hidden assumptions that allow us to interpret our experiences as we interact with people. These shared meanings form a framework that acts as a starting point for our sense of what it means to be human, what constitutes normal behavior, how to make moral/ ethic choices, and we generally see as reasonable. Deep culture generally functions out of awareness at the intuitive level, and we generally remain unaware of it until confronted with a need to interact with people who have different cultural assumptions" (Deep culture--- The Hidden Challenges of Global Living).

The relevance of cuisine can be perceived in the fact that,

"Eating is a daily reaffirmation of who you are. Generations after the loss of their mother tongues, ethnic Americans are still likely to be cooking and eating some version of the family´s "mother cuisine", even though it may be significantly changed from food in their homelands" ("Ethnic Cuisine").

The Indian cuisine is as varied as India´s linguistic situation, its ethnicity and its culture. The Indian cuisine has the trace of historical forays on the part of Aryans, Arabs, Persians, British and Portuguese. But at the same time, the Indian cuisine done by Indian

immigrants in countries other than their own has been pervaded by the cooking and eating habits of the local cultures.

In this paper, cuisine is examined as a marker of cultural identity and to that end a hermeneutic look is cast at the short story "Indian Cuisine" (by Trinidadian-Canadian writer Ramabai Espinet); the author has adhered to Daniel Chandler´s typology of codes.

Development

According to Daniel Chandler's typology, codes are divided into:

1. - **Social codes**:

a. - Verbal language (phonological, syntactical, lexical, prosodic and paralinguistic codes).

b. - Bodily codes (bodily contact, proximity, physical orientation, appearance, facial expression, gaze, head nods, gesture and posture).

c. - Behavioral codes (protocols, rituals, role-playing, games).

2. - **Textual codes**:

a.- Aesthetic codes (poetry, drama, painting, sculpture, music and so on),including classicism, romanticism, realism; genre, rhetorical and stylistic codes, as well as plot, characters, action, dialogue, setting, exposition, argument, etc.

3. – **Interpretative codes**:

a. – Perceptual codes: Those of visual perception, for example.

b. - Ideological codes: Codes for encoding and decoding texts. Here he considers the 'isms', i.e., individualism, liberalism, feminism, racism, materialism, capitalism, progressivism, conservatism, socialism, objectivism, consumerism and populism.

For Chandler there is a direct correspondence between these three kinds of codes and another three kinds of knowledge that a reader of a text needs. In other words, a text reader necessitates knowledge of: (Semiotics for beginners)

. The world (social knowledge)

. The medium and the genre (textual knowledge)

. The relationship between the other two (modality judgments)

"**Indian Cuisine**".

The story begins with the narrator remembering the smell—the "gramarye"--- of a fruit cocktail that ever since she was a child has been present in her. The fruit cocktail memory came from one Christmas day that she spent in her cousins´ place and she got no Christmas presents. People were singing, drinking and playing "bottle-and-spoon music and a cuatro", and the kids were given a bowl of fruit cocktail which they ate at 1 o´clock am. The narrator keeps thinking back that she returned home on Boxing Day and she had no gift, the other children were playing and all she found for her was a toothbrush stand with a Mickey Mouse head wrapped in used Christmas paper.

There was poverty all about the house, there was hunger, mainly when Father would lose as he was a heavy gambler. "Things were hard" and Mum got a job. And it was then when the narrator had to begin to do the cooking, so she had the chance to put into practice everything she learned while reading the Boston Cooking School Book.

Eventually, the narrator becomes a "designer of cuisine", a hobby in which she was the most sought after one and where she brought into practical use all the "training (received) at the school of Indian Cuisine of La Plata".

Codes

Textual

"Indian Cuisine" might be well called Privilege. There is a play with the word *privilege*, which appears several times along the text. "*A childhood of privilege*" is a comment

made at the outset by another character whom the narrator is reading her "therapeutic journal of things past", and it is irony what this comment resembles the most if we consider the narrator´s childhood was one of poverty, hardships and hunger. The word *privilege* is used rhetorically for the second time. The narrator questions whether having that fruit cocktail on Christmas, away from Dad, Mum and siblings, was a privilege, and she answers she doesn´t know. Later on, she remembers a party where there were people from different backgrounds and everybody took a dish: there was serre from Belize, pelau from Trinidad and privilege from Barbados which was but a "dish made of cornmeal and pigeon peas and coconut milk cooked-down together". And the narrator didn´t know why they called it privilege. Yet, she did know her genuine privilege was having plenty of books at home, and reading them: Dr Chase´s Almanac, Alistair Cooke (Mom´s cookbooks), her father´s pornography, the Reader´s Digest, The Diary of Anne Frank; and writers such as Zola, Marie Corelli, Lloyd C. Douglas, Pearl S. Buck, Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, Thoureau, Ruskin and Shakespeare.

Privilege re-appears when she talks about her full-time job as a home cook. Her mother "would go to work and I would have dinner cooked before she came home. Exactly like co-wives. But it wasn´t strange; it was just our life. It wasn´t privilege".

And privilege splits the story into two stages:

"Privilege is the life I lead now. I can do anything I like in this city because I earn enough and am my own woman (…) Perhaps it´s just old fruit cocktail privilege.

Privilege is also my hobby as a designer of cuisine".

And the final line of the story is: "So privilege it really was, fruit cocktail and all".

The story can be labeled within Realism. The descriptions of both characters and settings are plain, for example:

Biche is an agricultural village in east Trinidad and Tobago, first inhabited in 1874. Chi Yan was a Chinese immigrant whose family owned most of Biche. This location appears in the story, and Mr. Chinaleong—the shop keeper who gave Grandpa credit-- could represent in the story a member of the real Chi Yan family.

The description made of the house where the narrator had lived, in Biche, shows that place and those years were alive in her memory:

"The wooden house sprawled at the front of the land while behind it stretching up a hill on one side and down into a ravine at the back was land, with trees, a chicken-coop, a duck-pen, a pig-pen and tables from long ago. The avocado tree had low branches swooping to the ground where we rode horse, then there was the forest of ochro bushes where we played cowboy-and-Indian, and the bushes near where we played shop".

And the image of La Plata, where the family moved, was also alive in her mind:

"It was different in the growing suburb of La Plata, just outside of San Fernando, where Da-Da had bought the small concrete house(…)Everyone on the street had a car and a refrigerator; we had neither-Yet. We borrowed ice from the neighbours (…)

In La Plata it was not Ok to carry a gallon of the pitch oil we used for cooking the long distance on foot from the Chinese shop to our house, while the pitch oil leaked against your legs and the gallon tin dug cruelly into the vulnerable area near the back of your knees. Everyone else had gas-stoves and had their gas delivered in huge cylinders (…)The day Papa brought home the sack of flour, Muddie made individual sada rotis on her tawa and crushed some garlic and fresh Spanish thyme into a little margarine".

Both descriptions contain dishes which are an important part of the narrator´s daily eating and identity. The very narrator says "Ochroes were our salvation". And the sada rotis is a very popular Indian dish that even though it is made on the tawa (a typically Indian implement) in the story, it was seasoned with Spanish thyme and margarine, two ingredients that might not be commonly used in India for that purpose.

As stated before, the characters are depicted in a plain way. For example, their speech is written in what would be considered sub-standard English:

"(…) if he don´t it drip here yuh bong to get it when yuh go back home" (Her cousin Bella).

"(…) leh mih get rid ah some small change" (Uncle Samuel).

"(…) Yuh eh find yuh too big for all a dat now?" (Her mother).

"If ah didn´t know yuh was a gambling peong I woulda guess by de way yuh handling dem bills." (Mr Jones).

All of them speak sub-standard English, except the narrator.

Social

Some dishes mentioned speak in favor of how important cornmeal was in their diet. The dialectal components of the parliaments above may be an indicator of the speaker´s schooling.

Finally, the music they were playing in Uncle Samuel's place at Christmas is worthy of notice:

"At about midnight we heard loud singing and music from the kitchen, bottle-and-spoon music and a cuatro, and men´s voices carrying on".

These Indian people, or Trinidadians descending from Indians, were very likely to be playing (according to the instruments used) Trinidadian music, either calypso o soca, not music from India.

Interpretative

Examining the social codes has allowed this author make some inferences of the characters´ identity. Likewise, there are some clues that may make the reader think of Da-Da (the narrator´s father) as a male chauvinist, and of the narrator´s feminism. Nevertheless, what is all the more important for this author is the analysis of cuisine as a marker of identity. Cuisine is the focus of the narrator´s identity. She ends up by becoming a designer of cuisine, but of what kind of cuisine? Is she a designer of Indian cuisine? After all, Indian cuisine is the title of the story. How come the protagonist of the story turned into a designer of cuisine? By the end, she is asked where she was trained and she answers:

"Well, when I was twelve years old I went through periods of excruciating hunger. So I swallowed the biggest cookbook I could find".

The client / acquaintance insisted.

"I answered with a straight face, 'I received most of my training at the school of Indian Cuisine in La Plata. It was a real privilege to be trained there".

But, as a matter of fact, she had not had a single source of learning, and her sources of learning did not have only one origin.

She became a much respected designer of cuisine, and her knowledge and skills were the upshot of several sources. First, she learned how to cook Indian dishes at home, within the family environment. But she also learned from the Boston Cooking School Book and from her mother´s West Indian cookbook. However, she did not learn to cook kitchere (an Indian dish) from any of these sources.

"It was Mousie from the country who came on a visit and told me how to do it. Muddie didn´t know too much about real Indian food and there were no cookbooks for that. I added shrimps to Mousie's recipe and served it up with tomato chokha on the side".

Typically West Indian dishes and Indian dishes are displayed along the story. The "*corn meal and pigeon peas and coconut milk all cooked down together*" (from Barbados), the *serre* (from Belize) and the *pelau* from Trinidad are present, besides the *toolum*, the *chilibibi* and the *callalloo*, and the *coo-coo* among others; and they were "all poor people´s Caribbean food". From India, we can find the *kitchere*, the *sada rotis*, the *pakora*, *the bhaji*, the *chokha*, etc. And the menu for the party of a Jamaican actress of renown, a friend of the narrator´s,

which appears by the end of the story, is a reflection of the Indian cuisine that identifies the narrator and which turns her into a very sought after designer of cuisine.

Conclusions

We could venture to wonder whether Ramabai Espinet is the implied author of the story Indian Cuisine. Does the narrator represent the real author of this story? After all, this stance serves well the task of giving a hermeneutic look at a fictional piece of writing.

If the deep structure of a culture has to do with people´s family, religion and history; and if it is what Joseph Shaules says it is, cuisine might be considered part of the deep structure of a culture.

The title of the story suggests a connection or an attachment to the cuisine of a specific country, which in this case is a multi-cultural country. In the story, however, the main character undergoes an enculturation in terms of the cuisine she learns and that comes to be a marker of her cultural identity. The original "Indian cuisine" becomes connotative, acquires a broader dimension and encompasses the East Indian cuisine, the West Indian cuisine and probably beyond.

As said before, the story might well be called Privilege. The narrator seems to be proud, seems to be privileged to have received all those culturally identifying influences: she is an Indian and she is a West Indian. And this mixed identity of hers is her Privilege. As she says in the very end,

"So privilege it really was, fruit cocktail and all".

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